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ABSTRACT

This paper, directed toward Americans who sponsor Cambodian refugees, provides background on these peoples' culture and refugee experience and suggests ways that they might be helped to adapt to life in the United States. It is emphasized that while Cambodians are very cooperative and easy-going, they will need help in a number of areas. In particular, it is recommended that American sponsors explain the value of and attitudes toward work in U.S. society, standards of hygiene, and the limitations of welfare supplements. Further, the paper explains various Cambodian cultural traits (including those related to family and interpersonal relationships, religion, leadership and organizational attitudes, attitudes toward medicine and illness, and gambling) that American sponsors should understand when dealing with these refugees. Also discussed are interethnic attitudes and conflicts among the major Southeast Asian refugee groups--Khmer, Indochinese, and Vietnamese. Information resources for American sponsors are also recommended. (GC)

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Cambodians:

THE CHALLENGE OF SPONSORSHIP

by

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CAMBODIANS:

THE CHALLENGE OF SPONSORSHIP

I. THE BACKGROUND OF CAMBODIAN REFUGEES

Under the rule of Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge (1975 to December 1978), escape from Cambodia was difficult. Security surrounding the people's workteams and along the border was strict, and an attempt to escape was a serious crime, usually punishable by death. Nevertheless, about 33,000 Cambodians, many of them government officials and others from the educated classes who Pol Pot sought to eliminate, did manage to cross the border and reach Thai camps. Most of them have since resettled in third countries.

Following the removal of Pol Pot through the Vietnamese invasion in January 1979, the trickle of refugees turned into a stream. Retreating Pol Pot forces destroyed all means of livelihood while the invading Vietnamese took the little that was left for their own provisions. People fleeing after the invasion include political and military Khmer Rouge of all levels, starving peasants and educated people who had managed to evade execution under Pol Pot. By June 1980, about 150,000 Cambodians were in Thai camps, over 200,000 in village camps on the Cambodian side of the border, and another 300,000 trekked periodically to the border from inside Cambodia to receive relief food, supplied through international efforts.

Over the course of two years, third country resettlement and a certain amount of voluntary and forced repatriation have reduced the numbers. By October 1982, about 77,000 Cambodians remained in the camps and about 230,000 along the border.

The Thai government, not recognizing Cambodians as refugees, does not allow them to stay in Thailand and insists that they will have to be resettled in third countries or go back to Cambodia. However, international refugee admissions are down, leaving the majority of Cambodians without hope for third country resettlement. After their experience of communist rule under Pol Pot most are not willing to return to present-day communist Cambodia and expect to live out their lives in camps or along the border.

Those Cambodians who are admitted to the United States at this time tend to have spent several years in camps, often since late 1979. Many of them were farmers, soldiers (prior to Pol Pot) or former government workers.

Not all refugees from Cambodia are ethnic Cambodians, or Khmer, a fact sponsors and refugee workers must keep in mind. In Cambodia, ninety percent of the population are Khmer, while the remaining ten percent are made up about equally of Chinese and Vietnamese. Traditionally, most Chinese engaged in trade and lived in cities and towns, while individual Chinese families lived in Cambodian villages where they tended to run the village stores. Intermarriage between Chinese and Cambodians is not uncommon, but rare between Cambodians and Vietnamese. Repeated Vietnamese aggression in history accounts for the generally poor relationship between Cambodians and Vietnamese. Vietnamese living in Cambodia are segregated in their own villages, but unlike the Chinese who had their own educational system, the Vietnamese were not permitted to have their own schools.

In the United States, the relationship between Cambodians and ethnic Chinese from Cambodia may be quite cordial, especially if both suffered together under Pol Pot. Mutual distrust and dislike between Cambodians and Vietnamese, however, persists. Such feelings are occasionally exacerbated when Vietnamese, because of their large numbers among Southeast Asian refugees, occupy leadership postions in Indochinese refugee programs. Vietnamese are likely to represent primarily their own interests, while a Cambodian in a leadership position probably faces a problem of receiving little or no cooperation from the Vietnamese.

Cambodians in America are anxious for their country. Those who would like to help their country frequently find themselves torn between wanting to support anti-Vietnamese efforts and fearing that money collected for that purpose will not get to its destination. Stories of dishonest people pocketing such monies abound.

II. ORIENTATION

As a group, Cambodians seem to have been the delight of sponsors. People who have worked with various Southeast Asian refugees frequently report that Cambodians stand out by being especially cooperative and reliable. American refugee workers, commonly overwhelmed with crisis situations, admit that because they have encountered relatively few problems with Cambodians, they know less about particular Cambodian needs than about those of other groups.

In spite of anxiety for relatives left behind and their own experience of extreme suffering, Cambodians tend to be able to concentrate their energies on getting on with life here. They also seem to be able to discard unrealistic expectations without great difficulty. Sure, America had always been thought of as the promised land, but that assumption along with rumors in the camps of monthly income (welfare), a furnished house, a job and possibly a car waiting for them upon arrival, have been fairly successfully dispelled by improved overseas orientation programs for U.S. bound refugees. Ask your Cambodians

whether they brought along some of the texts and materials used in the program. It will give you a good idea of what was already covered.

In spite of earlier overseas orientation, you will still need to teach your refugees many things. They will need to internalize the fact that most Americans are not rich by American standards and that one has to work hard to lead a good life. And even though Cambodians have known extremely hard work under Pol Pot and are willing to do it, a talk on the function of welfare as a means to overcome a temporary crisis, its limited usefulness for bringing about improvement in one's standard of living, and the danger of getting accustomed to not having to work, is in order. You may also have to discuss the topic of cleanliness, especially if your Cambodian family comes from a rural background. Many Cambodians knew only a life where all washing was done at the river, where most activities took place outdoors, and where cleanliness inside the house was not an issue. They will need to understand the importance of cleanliness not only for their own health, but also for making friends with Americans and for good neighborly relations in general.

One of the most important tasks of the sponsor is to establish a relationship of trust with the refugees. Almost all Cambodians will accord great respect to the sponsor, but while the respect shown is genuine, it is quite different from trust. One way to deepen your personal relationship with your Cambodians is by being interested in, and learning as much as you can, about their country. Written information on atrocities committed in Cambodia under Pol Pot are plentiful. The article in the May 1982 National Geographic is a good place to start. The U.S. Committee for Refugees has a booklet entitled Cambodian Refugees in Thailand: The Limits of Asylum, which presents the circumstances of Cambodians leaving their country and seeking refuge in Thailand. Ask for a free copy (20 West 40th Street, New York, N.Y. 10018; 212-398-9142). You also express your interest by seeking appropriate information for your refugees. Cambodian mutual assistance associations across the country publish various newsletters in the Cambodian language. Find out whether there is one in your area.

In general, Cambodians tend to be appreciative of any efforts on their behalf, though they do not necessarily verbalize their thank-yous. Instead, they are more likely to remember and try to find an opportunity to return a favor.

Giving your refugee family plenty of your personal time is a crucial contribution. But while your refugees thrive on your concern and interest, they also benefit from knowing the limits of your sponsorship. Let them know, for example, that you will pay for their rent for only so long and that they will be on their own afterwards. Alert them in advance that material help will come to an end, even though your friendship and concern will remain. This will guard against the unlikely situation that your refugees see you as being primarily a source of material benefits and will prevent a feeling of abandonment when aid comes to an end. In the meantime, teach them whatever you do for them initially to do for themselves (for example, how to pay a bill).

There is a fair amount of secondary migration (moving away from original sponsor) among Cambodian refugees in the United States. Usually this happens for reasons of family reunification, wanting to be close to a larger Cambodian community, better climate, training and schooling, or (sometimes imagined) better job prospects. Quite a few Cambodians are not accustomed to making long-range plans. They may pick up and leave on the spot. Even when their relationship with you is excellent, they are likely to find it very difficult to confront you with the unpleasant news that they want to move. Some are able to overcome this inhibition and give you advance notice, but others wait till the last minute. Occasionally an individual may not be able to muster the necessary courage at all and will leave without any good-byes. It seems that refugees who move to another area have known the names and whereabouts of the friends or relatives they go to reunite with since before their arrival. You might therefore take the initiative and ask your refugees early on whether they hope to join others in another part of the country. This can give you a clue as to whether this particular sponsorship will be a short one and will make it easier for your Cambodians to let you know about their intentions.

Chances are that your Cambodian refugees are psychologically prepared to lead one kind of life, that of a farmer, teacher, or whatever it may be. Had they stayed in Cambodia they would have continued in that activity throughout their lives. Here, they find themselves overwhelmed with many options and having to make decisions that will affect their lives dramatically. You can reduce their stress by helping them to make a number of short-term mini-plans, e.g. two weeks to get oriented in the city, eight weeks to concentrate on learning English, etcetera. Knowing what is coming up--even if plans change on the way--is easier than coping with uncertainty.

While refugees may have a difficult time making decisions and are unfamiliar with many conveniences of modern life, they are strong people and do not lack intelligence. In fact, <u>most refugees would not have made it out of their country, through a refugee camp and into a third country, had they not been extremely resourceful and independent. They want to, and need to, continue to make their own decisions</u>.

III. ADJUSTMENT TO LIFE IN AMERICA

<u>Family relationships</u>: Children are raised to respect elders and parents and adhere strictly to certain basic values. Compared to American standards, however, little discipline is required during early childhood years. In contrast, children of preadolescent years shoulder more responsibility than their American counterparts. Parental authority remains the frame of reference well into adulthood, to a point were removal of this authority, as in the case of single unaccompanied young Cambodian refugees, may leave them disoriented and vulnerable to the lures of drugs, alcohol, and other negative influences.

As in other Asian cultures, family concerns tend to take precedence over individual concerns, and all family relationships, even distant ones, provide a basis for immediate and continued trust. Mutual assistance among relatives is taken for granted and requires no specific gratitude on the part of the receiver, or generosity on the part of the giver. Thus, less fortunate members crowding around more fortunate family members is not uncommon, especially in a new country.

Family relationships overriding most other concerns also relates to the fact that Cambodians who have resettled in the U.S. spend a great deal of time and effort trying to have other family members follow them. Helping them in this effort will create an additional bond of trust between you and your Cambodian refugees.

Interpersonal relationships: Achieving results and success is to westerners what maintaining harmonious relationships, dignity and self-respect is to Asian people. In daily life, preserving human dignity demands self-control, no matter what the internal turmoil might be, and forbids any direct, even if ever so rational, criticism of a person or a person's ideas. The prime goal is harmony between the speakers, to say what the other person wants to hear.

If Cambodians are careful not to confront people with unpleasant facts, preferring to hold back their true opinions and dislikes with their own people, this trait intensifies when they deal with Americans. Therefore, whenever possible, try to phrase your questions in such a way that they can choose among alternatives. Occasionally you might need to go through a third party in order to find out the true situation or intention.

When Cambodians find themselves in unpleasant situations, they tend to conceal their discomfort with a smile or laugh. With some sensitivity and practice, you will learn to distinguish between laughs that express joy, embarrassment or anger, and you become increasingly adept at reading reactions and feelings more from facial expressions and body language than from verbal answers. Your Cambodian refugees almost certainly want a good relationship with you and therefore feel best when they know what is expected of them. In this way, they do not have to guess how to please you and can be sure not to offend you, causing you and them distress.

Children: Refugee children, and Cambodian children are no exception, generally adjust better and more quickly to a new society than do their parents. The problems that do arise frequently stem from negative behavior of American children who dislike the different looks, behavior, and food of refugee children and may be outspoken in their dislike, to a point of being cruel. As an individual sponsor you cannot reform the entire society around you, but you can organize activities to which both American and refugee children are invited, teach the children close to you about different countries and refugees, or make sure that such teaching is incorporated into Sunday school programs. If you have access to the necessary equipment, you can also borrow an excellent WORLD

RELIEF filmstrip (10 minutes) which is appropriate for children from six years old and up. Write to WORLD RELIEF and ask for "Survival in the Eighties."

Employment: In general, Cambodians, especially those with children, have been eager and willing to take any job available and have shown themselves to be good workers. Many, however, knew only the life of a farmer, lack other work skills and have no knowledge of how to go about presenting themselves to a potential employer. Your best approach, therefore, is not necessarily finding them a job entirely through your own efforts, but to involve your refugees as much and as often as possible in the process, to expose them to interviews and teach them job searching skills. Chances are that they will have to, or want to, look for other opportunities eventually and that they will be on their own then. Any job hunting skills you taught them will stay with them and come in handy at that time.

If your refugees have had good education and held professional jobs back home, they may need an occasional reminder that pay is not necessarily the most important factor in holding an initial low-level job. Work experience and an employment record in America will be to their advantage when they look for the next job.

Because of their emphasis on harmonious relationships, Cambodians tend to work hard to please their employers. While most employers love this attitude, some exploit it to their own advantage and once in a while an employer actually seeks to slow down excessively energetic Cambodian workers to keep peace in the organization. For the same reason that Cambodians may work hard to please their employers, a rough word from an employer may make them walk out from their job never to go back.

Whether it is English classes, vocational training or job hunting, former sponsors strongly recommend that you implement some plans as soon as possible after arrival. A period of time where the refugee family has no plans and is supported seems to be counterproductive for a smooth transition to independence.

Welfare: In the camps and through the grapevine of the Cambodian communities, many refugees hear about the differences of welfare payments in the various states. They are also aware of the fact that in many cases welfare payments may produce more money in their pockets than a minimum wage job, while at the same time also providing the needed medical benefits which are frequently not part of a low-level job. In addition, because of a relatively weak drive for success and achievement and the importance of character development and harmonious interpersonal relationships, they attach no shame to not working.

The tendency to rely on welfare becomes more pronounced in areas where there is a large concentration of Cambodians and where a core of welfare recipients entices newcomers to join their ranks. Make it clear to your refugee family that welfare payments remain at approximately the same level and do not raise the standard of living of the family, but that a job, though perhaps seemingly less attractive in the beginning, will lead to better positions and more money.

They will also need to know that in America dependency on welfare is looked down upon and that this attitude will affect their relationships with Americans, in general, and with neighbors, in particular.

Schooling: In Cambodia, children did not have any schooling between 1975 and 1979. Those who lived in areas under communist control prior to Pol Pot may not have had any formal schooling since 1970. This can present a problem in finding the proper grade level for an older child.

Cambodians share a deep respect for education and usually are serious students. Help your refugees decide whether an immediate job with the advantages of accumulating work experience or schooling is the appropriate approach toward reaching self-sufficiency.

Mental health: Many of the Cambodian refugees have experienced extreme suffering under Pol Pot and during their flight. Having reached safety themselves, they worry about family members left behind under uncertain conditions. Considering this background one might expect Cambodians to suffer more from mental stress than other refugee groups. Yet, that is not so. Instead of dwelling on the past and becoming incapacitated, Cambodians, as a group, are surprisingly adept at facing the demands of the new life in America. When mental stress does surface, it may do so in a number of ways: physical problems, fatigue, insomnia, marital conflicts, anger, etcetera. As in other refugee groups, the educated persons, especially those who were well established in Cambodia and who face the greatest downward mobility in the U.S., are most likely to suffer from mental stress.

While you do not want to overprotect your refugees, there is little harm in spoiling them with attention. By keeping them busy and not letting them withdraw and brood over past unpleasant experiences, you can help them overcome possible depression.

Religion: About ninety percent of Cambodian refugees left their country as Buddhists. Cambodian men over forty years of age are likely to have spent some time living as a monk in a temple when they were young. This has not been true since the late 1960's, when civil war started spreading through the country. Many Cambodians who were still young at that time know comparatively little about Buddhism.

While in Cambodia, most families engaged in some form of ancestor worship, which is partially religious and partially an extension of one's filial duty. Such worship usually involves presenting food to, and invoking the souls of, ancestors and asking for protection or favors from them. In the U.S., the practice may be continued at rather irregular intervals.

When invited to attend church by the sponsor, Cambodians will often go along, following their customary behavior of not denying requests from a person they respect, and they do so feeling that they are being good guests. They may also go along because they enjoy the opportunity to meet people and to learn English.

Others, however, feel uncomfortable when they find themselves invited continually; yet, they are unable to turn down the invitation directly. It might therefore be best to extend a direct invitation only once or twice. Stress the fact that they should always feel welcome but that they should base their decision to attend church on their own inclination, rather than on the wishes of the sponsor.

Cambodian communities and organizations: The influence of the Cambodian community touches more than the newcomers' attitudes toward holding a job and taking advantage of welfare. For the majority of its members, the Cambodian community is their social world, their frame of reference. Comparing oneself with the other Cambodian family down the street is very common, but can be interpreted positively as well as negatively. Wanting as much or more than the other family means the new family also wants to "make it," and as such the competition serves as a motivation to work hard. At the same time, the competitive drive may also lead some members to buy more than they can afford; for example, an expensive car instead of proper food and clothing.

Cambodians are not great organizers. As one informant put it: "We have two problems: Cambodians like to belong but they do not want to have to work for it, so that the leader usually has to do all the work. The second problem is that nobody, including the leaders, follows any set rules. The group follows the leader out of personal loyalty."

Illness: Depending on the background of your Cambodian family, attitudes toward western medicine will vary. Many Cambodians are familiar with western medical care, though some women find it difficult to be treated by a male doctor. Others continue to rely on their traditional methods and medicine as much as possible. For example, a special kind of massage, "coining," that leaves black and blue marks on the body is often used as a way to cure the common cold, headaches, or general discomfort. Pulling strains of hair is believed to serve the same purpose by also bringing blood to the surface. If a Chinese store is accessible, Cambodians will probably go there for some Chinese medicine.

As with other personal information, Cambodians are not likely to tell the sponsor about minor (and sometimes not so minor) discomforts. They do not want to bother or inconvenience others. If they do mention their discomfort, even if only in passing, chances are they consider it serious and would like to see a doctor.

Recreation: More than seeing sights, listening to music, etcetera, Cambodians like to be with people. If they have an apartment to themselves, you may observe a stream of visitors coming and going. Since they were also very much outdoor people in Cambodia, they will probably enjoy their company outside when the weather is warm.

In the old days, gambling was quite common in Cambodia. After 1975, however, people had no time for any kind of entertainment, let alone gambling. In the U.S., time, boredom, lack of money and opportunities of other kinds of

recreation, and the forced indoor living has brought some of the gambling back. In some cases Cambodian women may spend more time gambling than the men, perhaps because they have fewer outside contacts, spend less time outside the home, and are unaccustomed to spending as much time on housekeeping as their American counterparts.

Occasionally, beer and gambling are combined and result in lengthy, unproductive get-togethers. Though some entire Cambodian communities in the U.S. strongly condemn all gambling and your Cambodian refugees may have no inclination to seek relaxation in this way, a talk about alcohol and gambling as part of your private orientation program for them is not out of place.

Language: Insufficient English is more than a handicap in communication, it also affects feelings and behavior. A Cambodian easily feels ashamed of being unable to speak the language well. Some sponsors have found that the degree of ability to speak English is related to openness about voicing opinions (which may mean the better English speaker is simply more acculturated). For example, a fairly good English speaker will admit more readily that he or she did not understand than someone whose English is more limited.

Negative questions, confusing to your refugees, may also leave you with unclear answers. "Yes, no," a Cambodian might respond to your question of "Don't you like potatoes?" meaning, "No, I don't like them"; or "No, yes," meaning "Yes, I do like them

IV. THE CHALLENGE OF SPONSORSHIP

The differences between the American and Cambodian ways of life are great and may sometimes lead to misunderstanding between you and your refugees. As people who have lost their homeland, they are likely to cling to familiar habits for reassurance. Though the burden of adjustment is upon the refugees, you can actively participate through understanding and help through advice. When you explain American patterns that they must learn, do not do so in terms of good and bad, superior and inferior ways of doing things. Remember that they are simply different. Every society has its own ways and there are advantages and disadvantages to each.

The general friendliness displayed to strangers as well as friends, which is the American way of dealing with people and therefore can be superficial, leads some Cambodians to assume that all American friendships are shallow. Find a way to show your refugees that you do care deeply. Getting to know the Cambodians will take time, especially because they do not verbalize their feelings; but patience and a non-judgemental attitude will help you to establish a relationship of trust and form a lasting friendship, which, by itself, can be a tremendously rewarding experience.